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ABSTRACT

A study examined children's theme comprehension of non-religious moral children's stories. The study used 3 tasks of ascending difficulty: (1) selecting the moral theme when it is found in a multiple-choice context; (2) identifying the story-with-the-same-message when the message is found in a new context; and (3) moral message construction (a summarization-type task). The study's main hypothesis was that there would be a developmental difference in the comprehension of the moral message in moral stories. Subjects were 127 students, 61 third-graders and 38 fifth-graders, plus 28 college-level students from a public university. All groups had an approximately equal number of males and females. Stories from Bennett's "Book of Virtues" (1992) and similar texts, as well as many picture books, were used. Subjects were tested in groups of 25-55 in 2 45-minute sessions 2 weeks apart. Results indicated that the main hypothesis of the study was supported. A second test for reading comprehension indicated that moral comprehension may involve more than general reading comprehension skills. Findings suggest that there was a developmental effect for all 3 tasks. (Contains 2 tables of data and 30 references.) (CR)

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**Moral story message comprehension: Similarities and differences
in third graders, fifth graders, and adults**

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Ten years after writing The Golden Notebook, Doris Lessing (1973) wrote about

reader reaction to it:

I can get, in one week, three letters about it...One letter is about the sex war, about man's inhumanity to woman, and woman's inhumanity to man...The second is about politics...and here she writes many pages about politics and never mentions any other theme. The third letter...is written by a man or a woman who can see nothing in it but the theme of mental illness. But it is the same book! And naturally these incidents bring up again questions of what people see when they read a book, and why one person sees one pattern and nothing else at all of another pattern, and how odd it is to have, as author, such a clear picture of a book, that is seen so differently by its readers."

The research in this report addresses issues raised by Lessing: what do children perceive to be the theme when they read or listen to stories which have a moral message? William Bennett (1993) and others have suggested that by reading and hearing moral stories, children will develop good moral character. As evident even before the use of the McGuffey reader over 100 years ago, the use of narratives and stories for moral education has been advocated by many. More recently it is supported by theorists (e.g., Tappan & Brown, 1989; Vitz, 1990) and more popularly by character education proponents like Bennett. In fact, Bennett's Book of Virtues (1993) was a runaway bestseller for more than a year only to be replaced on the bestseller list by its sequels. The popularity of these books is due in part to the claims of Bennett and others (Kilpatrick, 1992; Lickona, 1991; Wynne & Ryan, 1993) who argue that, in order to develop moral values and good character, children need to hear and read moral stories. Despite a lack of research supporting recommendations to read stories in order to

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build values (Leming, 1993), these advocates assume that children comprehend moral stories in the way that adults do and in the way that authors intend. In fact, narrative comprehension research demonstrates that children do not understand narratives in the same way as adults do (e.g., Collins, 1983; Perfetti, 1985; van den Broek, Lorch & Thurlow, 1996). There is evidence that adults themselves may not understand moral narratives in a uniform fashion since there are recall differences for moral reasoning in narrative texts due to moral judgment development (Narvaez, 1996).

Research on theme comprehension

Theme comprehension or extraction has been approached in various ways. Lukens (1982) defined a theme as "the idea that holds the story together, such as a comment about society, human nature, or the human condition" Lukens suggested that a theme answers the question: "What does it all mean?" Several researchers have looked at children's ability to extract a theme. Taylor (1986) studied summary writing in 4th and 5th grade students including summarizing the point of a narrative. Although Taylor found that summarizing the narrative was easy for the children, summarizing its point was not; it was as difficult as summarizing an expository text. In a study about the development and processes of summarization, Johnson (1982) found that summarization was more difficult than recall for young children. Brown, Campione, & Day (1981) tested rules for summarizing texts and found that the most difficult task for novices was adding information, as is required in constructing a theme, rather than just modifying existing sentences. Goldman, Reyes & Varnhagen (1984) studied K-6 children's understanding of fables, including their ability to extract a lesson from each fable. Children were generally unable to generalize a lesson until

fourth grade. Younger children tended to give more concrete, story-specific statements as lessons. Lehr (1988) gave kindergartners, 2nd and 4th graders three stories and asked them to do several things including matching two by theme, summarizing and extracting the lesson. Some stories were realistic and some were folktales (and some were familiar like The three little pigs). Previous high exposure to literature improved scores on theme identification but there was a developmental trend for theme identification among low-exposure students. She found that it was easier to generate and identify themes from realistic fiction than from folktales. In sum, theme extraction is a difficult task for children, especially for expository texts and unrealistic fiction; it generally does not occur until fourth grade.

Regardless of age, themes are not typically included in story recall nor in responses to questions regarding what the story was about (Brown, Campione & Day, 1981; Goldman, Reyes & Varnhagen, 1984; Mandler & Johnson, 1977; Stein & Glenn, 1979; Taylor, 1986). Main points are not automatically extracted from texts (Afflerbach, 1990; Reder & Anderson, 1980; Williams, 1993) but require generalizing from the literal level of the text (van Dijk & Kintsch, 1978).

The relationship between theme comprehension and general reading comprehension has been studied in regard to its influence on text comprehension. Dooling & Mullet (1973) varied the point at which a thematic title was presented (before, after, not at all) for prose passages. Those who saw the theme before reading the text performed significantly better on comprehension and recall. Background knowledge also affects theme extraction. Afflerbach (1990) found that experts automatically construct the main idea of texts that are

about familiar topics significantly more than for texts about unfamiliar topics. Afflerbach suggests that main idea construction is not automatic or fundamental.

Moral story comprehension

The research reported here focuses on the comprehension of moral messages in children's stories. Although there have been a number of studies about moral or theme comprehension, often the authors interpret "moral" to mean the point of the story, whether or not it has to do with morality. However, there are a couple of studies that included moral messages in their stimulus materials. Johnson & Goldman (1987) studied children's ability to recognize rules of moral conduct in stories and their ability to group stories according to the rules of conduct. They used Bible stories that illustrated one of three "rules of conduct": helping, obeying or not being afraid. Young children tended to group stories according to actions and concrete items rather than rule similarity.

Stein & Trabasso (1982) manipulated aspects of intention by varying information about motives and their goal-relatedness; making a story variant of Kohlberg's "Heinz and the drug," they manipulated the goals and severity of consequences. They tested comprehension and evaluation of outcomes in response to manipulations.

The present study investigated theme comprehension in non-religious, moral stories. Our definition of "moral" is a philosophical one involving cooperation with others (Piaget, 1932; Rawls, 1971; Rest, Narvaez, Bebeau & Thoma, 1997). For us, a "moral story" has a theme about a specific aspect of cooperation. In the selection of texts for this study, we did not choose texts such as Aesop's fables since they focus mostly on types of prudence (e.g., don't be vain, plan wisely, don't be fooled, etc.). In this study we used well-constructed

stories from children's literature which had moral themes.

We expected to find that moral theme extraction would be more difficult for younger readers. We set up three tasks which we expected to be of increasing difficulty: selecting the moral theme when it is found in a multiple-choice context, identifying the story-with-the-same-message when the message is in a new context, and moral message construction (a summarization-type task).

Method

Hypotheses

The main hypothesis was that there would be a developmental difference in the comprehension of the moral message in moral stories. A secondary set of hypotheses reflected the assumption that there would be a differential level of difficulty in the tasks regarding moral theme identification. The moral generation task should be more difficult than the multiple-choice tasks. It was expected that the story selection task would be more difficult than the theme selection task.

Subjects

The sample consisted of 127 subjects, 61 third grade students (mean age=9) and 38 fifth grade students (mean age=11) from suburban schools who volunteered to participate, and 28 college-level students from an public university who received course credit for participation. All groups had approximately equal numbers of males and females.

Materials

Stories from The Book of Virtues and similar texts, as well as many picture books, were examined in an effort to find stories with clear moral (and not prudential) messages and

that had a beginning, middle, and end, and were coherent.

Several stories were selected for research purposes. "Mother Snowbed" (or "Mother Holly"), a Grimm tale (825 words). It is about two daughters of very different character who, when faced with the chance to help others, react in very different ways. Each daughter is rewarded appropriately. "Damon and Pythias" is an ancient Greek tale (649 words). A man is condemned to death but asks to settle his affairs and say goodbye to his parents before he is executed. The king allows him to do so only because a friend agrees to take his place in prison and be executed if the man does not return within a given time. "Natural Habits" is an African tale about a monkey and a rabbit who cannot stand each other's natural habits (473 words). They challenge each other to modify them but are unsuccessful. A fourth, an intercultural picture book story, How my parents learned to eat, was used to measure reading comprehension in the children (605 words). A true-false test was designed to test comprehension for this story. All the texts approximated a Flesch-Kincaid readability level of grade three.

Tasks

There were three tasks to test moral message understanding: 1) The constructed response for each moral story, in which students wrote what they thought was the author's message. It was scored in two ways. It was scored as a gist "hit" or a "miss" and also as high or low on cooperation. 2) Readers selected the best moral theme from a selection of six possible themes (the distractors were generated from story material-- being superficial points, truisms or minor subthemes). See Table 1 for the choices. 3) Readers identified which of three short stories had the same moral theme as the original story (one story type used the

same actions--i.e., the same plot characteristics-- but had different actors and a different message; a second story type used the same actors but involved different actions and messages, the third story type had different actions and actors but the same message). From these three tasks we developed an aggregate score that combined the responses from the three tasks for each of the three moral stories.

The independent variables were age/grade level and, for the children, score on the true-false comprehension test of the fourth story.

Procedure

The children were tested in groups of 25 to 55 in two 45-minute sessions one week apart. Each child was given printed booklets containing a practice story ("The boy who cried wolf") in which they were shown how to do all three tasks, three stories which were used to test the student's ability to identify the moral theme, and a fourth story used to assess story comprehension independent of theme. The stories and test items were all presented both on paper and on audiotape so that reading skill differences would be less likely to interfere with story comprehension. The tape recordings were made by a former professional voice actress. Children responded to the questions by marking the booklets.

The questions asked after each of the moral stories were the following:

- 1) What do you think the message or theme of this story is? In other words, what do you think the author would like you to learn from reading this story? You may quickly look back at the story but we will only give you one minute to answer.
- 2) Please read the following three stories and then decide whether Story A, Story B, or Story C has the same message as [the story]. Circle the name of the story that

best matches the message at the bottom of the page.

3) Some people have suggested one of the following to be the message of [the story].

Please read the following list of possible messages and circle the one you think best fits [the story].

The adults read the material and answered the questions on their own. Children took a true-false test of 20 items to assess their reading comprehension of the fourth, non-moral, story. Adults did not read this story or complete the test.

Scoring

After several pilot studies testing stories and test items, a control group of adults completed the tasks to make sure that the researchers' understandings of the themes were in line with those of adults. An independent check of the validity of the target moral theme for each story was performed with 20 adults. The adults read the stories and then performed the two multiple-choice tasks. 1) they selected the story, out of three, that had the same moral message; 2) they selected the best message out of a list of six messages. The adults agreed 100% with the researchers regarding which message and story best reflected the original story.

For the primary analyses, scores for each story task were computed separately and then aggregated across tasks and stories for a moral comprehension score consisting of twelve items. For the moral generation task, answers were scored in two ways for each of the three stories: for getting the gist of the message (hit=1 or miss=0), and for high or low cooperation with others in the answer. Interjudge reliability was calculated at .95 using Cohen's kappa. For the multiple-choice message selection and story selection tasks,

participants' choices were coded as hit/miss. A Cronbach alpha was computed for this 12-item index of moral comprehension, $\alpha = .65$.

Results

Two separate sets of analyses were conducted on the data. In the first analysis, an aggregate score was computed across tasks and stories. A one-way ANOVA was conducted for age level. In the second, Chi-square analyses were conducted across age groups for the task in each story.

Moral comprehension

The main hypothesis, that there is a developmental difference in the comprehension of the moral message in moral stories, was supported. A one-way ANOVA was significant for the aggregate moral comprehension score, $F_{(2,122)} = 24.79$ ($p < .0001$) which indicates a developmental difference in moral message comprehension. (See Figure 1.) Concern that this might only be due to reading comprehension prompted a separate ANOVA for children's scores using reading comprehension scores as a covariate. This, too was significant, $F_{(1,94)} = 11.18$ ($p < .001$), suggesting that moral comprehension may involve more than general reading comprehension skills.

Story and task analyses

A secondary set of hypotheses compared tasks within story across age (see Figure 2). These analyses were based on the assumption that the tasks reflect a differential level of difficulty in moral theme identification. The moral generation task should be more difficult than the multiple-choice tasks. It was expected that the story selection task would be more difficult than the theme selection task. The proportions of correct responses by grade for

these tasks are listed in Table 2. All Chi-square comparisons were significant except for two. The proportions indicate a developmental effect for all tasks.

Discussion

This study investigated children's ability to identify a moral theme. Advocates of character education suggest reading stories with moral messages to children as a way to instill good values, but is this advice well-founded?

Both types of data analyses used in this study, the aggregate and the story-specific, indicate that the younger children had a more difficult time with all the moral comprehension tasks than did the older children. They made more errors in selecting the theme from a list, in selecting a story with the same theme and in constructing a theme for the story. They also had a more egocentric perspective on the themes they generated, not constructing a cooperative theme as often as the fifth grade students or adults. There was a developmental trend on all tasks with adults performing at ceiling levels on most tasks. The third grade students performed best on one story, *Mother Holly*. This story is clear and concrete about the rewards/benefits of good/bad behavior. Contrary to expectation, the story selection task was not more difficult than the theme selection task.

This research does not answer the question of whether or not moral theme comprehension functions in the same way as general theme comprehension. The relationship between general theme comprehension itself and reading comprehension skills is not clearly delineated, although there is some evidence that the ability to generalize a theme (that is, to move beyond concrete elements) develops by fourth grade (Goldman et al., 1984). Our data suggest that most children are able to do this by the end of third grade but many are not.

Jetton (1994) found that elementary school children are strongly influenced by narrative story elements, and have great difficulty extracting embedded text elements such as expository information which is not part of the story grammar. Jetton's finding is similar to what we found with the youngest subjects. These subjects had difficulty extracting the moral message from other elements. Rosenblatt (1991) and Britton (1984) also state that ability to extract embedded information is difficult and depends on factors such as point of view and how the reader focuses attention.

Our research indicates that children do not necessarily pick up the message intended by the author in a narrative. Reading comprehension skills help but are not sufficient for picking up a moral message. Contrary to the claim of character education proponents, it takes more than reading or hearing a moral story to develop "moral literacy". Williams (1994), for example, has demonstrated that fifth and sixth grade students can understand the theme of a narrative, but it required extended and skillful instruction to teach this higher-order comprehension skill. Thus, the recommendations by Bennett and other proponents of character education who argue that children can learn values by hearing moral stories cannot be supported based on our findings. The ability to extract a moral theme from a narrative depends on factors such as the age of the child and skillful intervention. Further research must determine what aspects of development are fundamental to moral theme comprehension and what forms of instruction can help overcome limitations in individual moral theme comprehension. Further research should also explore the factors that lead a reader to frame the moral theme in terms of cooperation rather than personal concern.

Table 1. Story theme choices (*=target theme)

Story
Damon and Pythias
1. It's not over till it's over 2. Be careful who your friends are 3. It's important to settle your business and say goodbye to parents before you die 4. Good luck may save you or your friend's life *5. A friend is someone who helps you even when it might hurt 6. Don't mess around with kings
Natural Habits
1. Monkeys and rabbits make rude friends 2. Be alert, you may get tricked 3. Never trust a monkey or a rabbit 4. It's not polite to turn your head or scratch when you are talking 5. Don't make promises you can't keep *6. Accept others as they are and don't try to change them
Mother Holly
1. Be good and you won't have to worry 2. Don't try to be anyone else, be your own person *3. Willingness to help others will be rewarded 4. If someone asks you to do something, do it 5. Ashes are no comparison to gold 6. Look before you leap

Table 2.
Proportions of hits by grade for each task by story and across stories.

	Grade 3 (n=61)	Grade 5 (n=38)	Adults (n=28)	Chi- square
Moral generation^a				
Damon	67	87	96	10.69**
Natural habits	64	87	100	16.82**
Mother Holly	87	87	100	4.11
Average across stories	73	87	99	
Theme selection^b				
Damon	79	95	96	3.04*
Natural habits	59	97	93	24.66**
Mother Holly	61	84	96	16.78**
Average across stories	66	92	95	
Story selection^c				
Damon	75	97	100	15.44**
Natural habits	59	89	96	20.05**
Mother Holly	85	89	96	2.46
Average across stories	73	92	97	

*Chi-square significant at $p < .01$

**Chi-square significant at $p < .001$.

^a The subject wrote what he or she thought was the theme of the story.

^b The subject selected the theme from a list of possible themes.

^c The subject selected the story with the same theme from a choice of three stories.

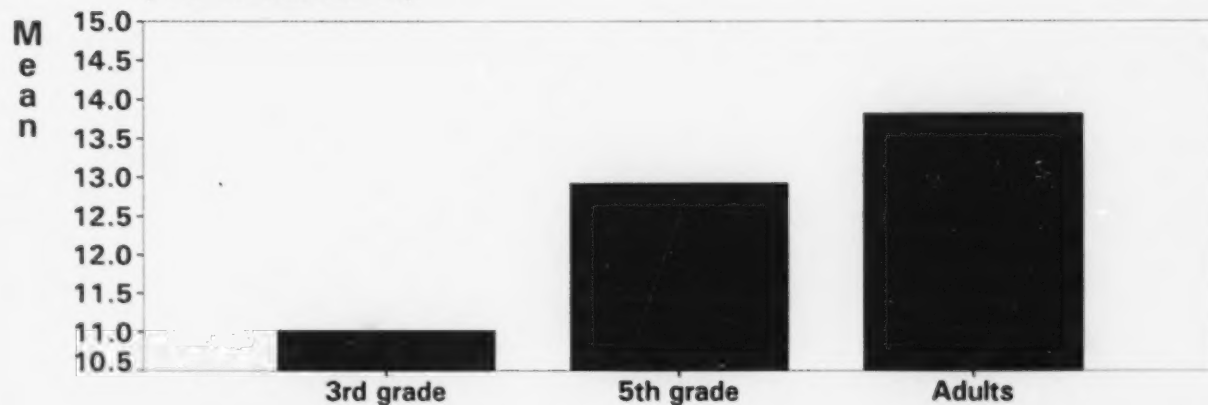
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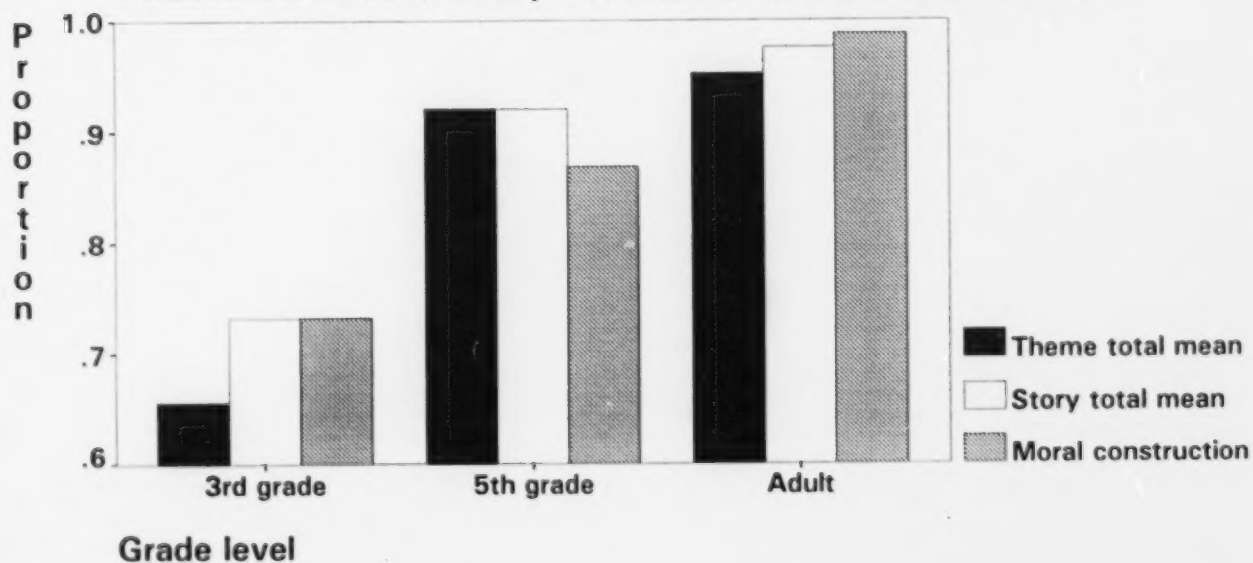
Figure 1: Mean average for aggregate moral comprehension score* by grade level (15 maximum)



Grade level

* Theme selection + story selection + moral construction + cooperation level across stories

Figure 2
Mean proportion by grade for key variables
Theme selection, Story selection, Moral construction



Appendix

SAMPLE STORY

The Boy Who Cried Wolf

There was once a shepherd boy who kept his flock of sheep at a little distance from town. Once he thought he would play a trick on the townspeople and have some fun at their expense. So he ran toward the village crying out with all his might:

"Wolf, wolf! Come and help! The wolves are at my lambs!"

The kind townspeople left their work and ran to the field to help him. But when they got there the boy laughed at them for their pains; there was no wolf there.

Still another day the boy tried the same trick, and the townspeople came running to help and were laughed at again.

Then one day a wolf did break into the fold of sheep and began killing the lambs. In great fright, the boy ran back for help. "Wolf! Wolf!" he screamed. "There is a wolf in the flock! Help!"

The townspeople heard him but they thought it was another mean trick; no one paid the least attention, or went near him. And the shepherd boy lost all his sheep.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. What do you think the message or theme of this story is? In other words, what do you think the author would like you to learn from reading this story? You may quickly look back at the story but we will only give you one minute to answer.

Here, you will write what you think the message is. For example, you might say:
"Don't lie, because if you lie no one will believe you when it's really important."

2. Some people have suggested one of the following to be the message of "The boy who cried wolf". Please read the following list of possible messages and CIRCLE the one you think best fits "The boy who cried wolf".

1. Don't trust shepherd boys
2. Wolves come when you least expect them
3. Sheep are helpless
4. Don't lie (The researcher believes that this is the message.)
5. People will help you if you are truthful
6. Wolves love a liar

3. Please read the following three stories and then decide whether Story A, Story B, or Story C has the same message as "The boy who cried wolf". Circle the name of the story that best matches the message at the bottom of the page.

Story A

Paul loved to play tricks on his parents. One of his favorite tricks that he liked to play was to scare his parents when they were making dinner. When he was outside, he would scream at the top of his lungs that he was stuck in the fifteen-foot tall tree. There were several times that both of his parents came rushing out of the house, leaving their

dinner to burn, in order to rescue Paul from the tree.

One day Paul really was stuck in the tree. Thinking that he was fooling them again, Paul's parents never even considered going outside to his rescue. After all, they didn't want to eat another burnt meal!!

A little while later, Paul's parents announced that dinner was served. Paul never came. Finally, Paul's parents went outside and saw Paul hanging onto a branch for dear life.

Story B

Hong saw the red box and couldn't resist; she hit the fire alarm-- again. It was the second time this month. She so enjoyed watching the firetrucks come and everyone walking out of school. This time they figured out who had tripped the alarm. The kindergarten teacher walked with her to the office where her parents were waiting. She was scolded by everyone for what seemed like a week. Finally, they let up. One day as she arrived late to her schoolroom, she noticed out the window that there was a firetruck. She yelled at the teacher, "Fire! Fire!" The teacher shook her head. Hong again said, "Fire! Fire!" The teacher looked out the window and nodded: "Oh, yes, firetruck," she said. "Firetruck," Hong said. She smiled and sat down for her English lesson.

Story C

One day, a shepherd boy was tending his sheep when a beautiful bird with green, gold and red feathers landed on a tree branch near the boy's head. He had never seen such a beautiful bird, and he stared at it in wonder. The bird took off again. The boy was so entranced he began to follow it as it flew from tree to bush to rock, forgetting all about the flock he was supposed to be watching. After a few hours, the boy remembered his sheep, and he ran back as quickly as he could, hoping they were alright. When he made it back, he found the other villagers watching his sheep. While he was gone, the sheep had wandered away. The adults scolded him for disappearing, so he told them about the bird, hoping they would no longer be angry. Some of the other villagers had seen such a bird and had also remarked on its beauty, but they told him that nevertheless he should have stayed with his flock and not run off.

Mark which of the three stories above, best matches the message of "The boy who cried wolf"?

Circle the title:

Story A

Story B

Story C

Story A is circled because it has the same message, "Don't lie," as "The boy who cried wolf".